

Ideation and Photography: a critique of François Laruelle's concept of Abstraction

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In the *Concept of Non-Photography* (2011), François Laruelle outlines an ambitious bid for a theory of photography that jettisons what he calls the “ontological distinctions and aesthetics notions”¹ of the Humanities; in other words, a theory of photography that demotes the interpretative and technical categories that hitherto have laid claim to photography’s singular realism, or world-disclosing capacities. This expulsion of photography’s normative “appeal to the World, to the perceived object”² is to be pursued, not unsurprisingly through an intellectual withdrawal from the organizational character of the social particulars, genres, styles and historicity of the photograph. This is why Laruelle is so insistent on the need for theory of photography that defies what he terms - familiar from his non-philosophy more generally - a decisionist (or subjectivist) interpretation of the photograph’s manifest content - what he calls an *abstract* theory of photography. Standard photographic theory accumulates stories and multiple historical truths and as such registers the quality and range of photographic affects, an abstract theory of photography, on the other hand, dispenses with them. Abstraction, then, in classically scientific terms is a subtractive move - an axiomatic and reductive operation - rather than a hermeneutic exercise. But this move is not built out of a new language of photographic form. By abstraction Laruelle does not mean the creation of a photographic theory that interrogates the immanent spatial relations of the photograph, as opposed to the semiotic analysis of scene or setting as a focus for the presence or absence of human activity, or that draws out the insignificant or overlooked detail (as in Salvador Dali and Roland Barthes) as a means of defamiliarizing the photography’s manifest content. There is no recourse to the ‘abstractedness’ of the internal relations of photography, or nothing of this sort that would turn his concept of abstraction into a new version of formalism. Furthermore, his understanding of abstraction has nothing in common with the production and

¹ François Laruelle, *The Concept of Non-Photography*, trans. Robin Mackay, Urbanomic, Falmouth, 2011, pviii

² Ibid, p3

reception of photography under the law of real abstraction (photography's commodity form), or the notion of real abstraction as source of photographic truth (as in photography's reliance since the 1960s [Ed Ruscha] on repetition and the sequence as a metonym of 'reified vision'). Nor has his theory anything to do with photography's relationship to social abstraction as the correlative of real abstraction or the value form (the socially heteronomous outcomes of capitalist competition on the material world, or what Henri Lefebvre called "representations of space"³: the production and reproduction of the built environment), in photography's capacity for the panoramic bird's eye view. Rather, for Laruelle, abstraction is what happens to photography when thinking about photography discards the mechanics of photographic interpretation as such – its "realist illusion,"⁴ its "already made 'interpretative frameworks' "⁵ – to concentrate on photography as a specific order of the scientific, what he calls its infinite field of materialities: a "manifold of determinations without synthesis."⁶ That is, photography is not a support for something else, something to be explained or narrativised on the basis of its manifest content, but an "unlimited theoretical space."⁷ Or, as Ray Brassier explains in an early, relatively sympathetic, account of Laruelle's non-philosophy: "the possibilities of philosophical invention, whether formal or substantive, are already delimited in advance by philosophy's decisional syntax."⁸

In this respect Laruelle follows, in a standard way, what other philosophers and theorists of photographic representation from Charles Sanders Peirce onwards have necessarily foregrounded – What is photography's relationship to the real? Why does photography continually recall us to the problem of the real? But for Laruelle, dramatically, this is pursued without any attachment to what has usually defined all schools – realist and anti-realist alike – within this tradition: namely photography's particular and vivid *worldliness* or social embeddedness. Thus if realists, and anti-realist differ on the conventionality or non-conventionality of the interrelationship

³ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1991

⁴ Laruelle, *ibid* p8

⁵ *Ibid*, p70

⁶ *Ibid*, 53

⁷ *Ibid*, p72

⁸ Ray Brassier, 'Axiomatic Heresy: The Non-Philosophy of François Laruelle', *Radical Philosophy*, No 121, September/October 2003, p33

between index and icon, they at least both necessarily recognize that photographs establish a definite social-relational encounter with the world. Even Umberto Eco in his defense of the photograph as an autonomous symbol recognizes this.⁹ Laruelle, however, pursues a conventionalist anti-realism and anti-Peircean position on the index/icon interface to the point where the photograph becomes absolute and pure idea. Indeed, abstraction is another word for the photograph's *ideational distance* from its depicted objects. "A photo manifests a distance of an infinite order or inequality to the World,"¹⁰ rendering things as "inert and sterile" before they appear.¹¹ "Photography allow one to see what a thing that is photographed resembles: the photo is only ever the photo *of* that which it *appears* to be the photo."¹² In other words, Laruelle, wants an abstract theory of photography that brackets the idea of photography as a possible mimetic Doubling of the World. Photographs for Laruelle are definable not through what they represent – their perceivable objects - but what they represent as a photographic act or force itself – a vision force - and as such are absolutely distinguishable from their extra-representational objects. He talks of photographs as being apparitional in this sense. Thus for all photo-theory's commonplace talk of photo-*realism*, photographs in fact, do not share a common space of objectification with perception at all; represented objects in photographs are one thing, their objective referents another. This is why he insists it is more appropriate to talk of photographs resembling *other* photographs than it is of photographs resembling their depicted objects. Indeed, contrary, to the research-scientific, legal and social uses of photography, photography has never been or can ever be an objective aid to perception.

Unsurprisingly, then, abstraction is a transcendentalizing process that runs in *parallel* with the world, as opposed to being in intimate association with it (in the Hegelian and dialectical sense), and as such, is a mode of appearing that is wholly exterior to appearances as a source of knowledge. In the photograph: "There are only pure 'phenomena', with no in-itself hidden behind them";¹³ the photograph is a "pure

⁹ Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1976

¹⁰ François Laruelle, *ibid*, p100

¹¹ *ibid*, p100

¹² *ibid*, p102

¹³ François Laruelle, *ibid*, p95

irreflective manifestation of the phenomenon-without-logos.”¹⁴ A strange disjunction emerges then. On the one hand photography invites an “unlimited theoretical” production, but on the other hand, it resists as a condition of its essence – what Laruelle calls the photograph’s ‘literalness’ or reproduction of the real-as-Identity - any social and discursive encounter with its depicted objects. This is perhaps why abstraction takes on a heightened figural character for Laruelle, as opposed to it possessing any kind of socially productive identity: in creating this flattened and parallel universe all photographs (not just staged or digitally composite ones), are an “absolute fiction.”¹⁵ Indeed, absolute fiction becomes the name precisely for Laruelle’s notion of theoretical speculation. Photographs lose their socially determined, causal-historic-genealogical identity – their identity as *concrete* abstractions derived from appearances - to become things operating transcendently at the limits of thought, that is, irreducible to representation and causation. This dissociation of the photograph from its depicted objects and conditions of production is hardly novel within conventionalism. Post-Kantian realists and idealists of course have long attacked the false conflation between resemblance and truth: but why, here, the *irreal inversion* of photography under the heading of abstraction? Why the absolute dismantling of indexicality and mimesis, and the reification of the photograph-as-symbol, in the name of abstraction? Why do photography and photo-theory need to become this peculiar parallel vision-force?

Laruelle’s critique of decisionism more broadly is predicated upon on what we might call a fear of philosophical propinquity or subjective intimacy. If Peter Sloterdijk has denigrated Western philosophy as a tragic history of *epoché* and ascetic contemplation, of maddening distance,¹⁶ Laruelle sees it, from the opposite perspective as a febrile and maddening entanglement of the philosophical subject with its objects.¹⁷ Western Philosophy or Greco-Occidental thought is always damagingly caught up with the arbitrary judgements and circularity of ‘doublet-thinking’: the endless passage back and forth from one contrary to another. Even deconstructionism

¹⁴ Ibid, p96

¹⁵ Ibid, p20

¹⁶ Peter Sloterdijk, *The Art of Philosophy*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2012

¹⁷ François Laruelle, *Philosophies of Difference: A Critical Introduction to Non-Philosophy*, translated by Rocco Gangle, Continuum, London, 2010

cannot escape this: as soon as the bifucatory logic is dismantled through the introduction of a suspensive third term, the circularity of meaning is restored at a higher level, a mere “softening”¹⁸ of the would-be perils of decisionism. Laruelle’s post-metaphysical, post-dialectical, non-Differencing solution, then, is bracingly simple, if technically convoluted: a kind of non-subjectivist halting to philosophical scission and aporetic scrupulousness, in order to situate thinking at the border between the universalizing ambitions of philosophical conceptualization and the axiomatic demands of science. But this is not an invitation to let science to take over the reins of philosophy. On the contrary, if philosophy for Laruelle needs to renew its vows with science – in order to clear out all the epistemological machinery of interpretation and Western philosophy’s decisionist intimacy with its objects – these vows do not in turn produce a new unified scientized philosophy. If philosophy needs science, this new science (of philosophy-as-science) refuses to forfeit philosophy’s special claims on the speculative. This is why Laruelle’s abstract theory of photography does not actually set out to explain photography scientifically – give it an ontology, or provide a topology of its effects or a taxonomy of its attributes – but rather, render it generically available for “unlimited theoretical” production.

In an article on Laruelle’s speculative methodology, Andrew McGettigan has called Laruelle pejoratively a philosopher as strong poet (in Richard Rorty’s sense), in which frustratingly the philosopher’s ‘intuition’ does the philosophical work, separate from any adequate historical and theoretically account of his objects of critique.¹⁹ There is some truth in this, but Laruelle’s commitment to a kind of a Gnostic speculation at the expense of the messy ideological, historical and social entanglements of objects and concepts, is less a failure of methodological judiciousness and explanatory clarity, than a familiar post-dialectic collapse of the critique of dogmatic metaphysics into an abstract rationalism, that it shares with speculative realism. So, the idea that we can subjectivize Laruelle or Laruelle’s anti-decisionist non-philosopher, as a ‘strong poet’ figure, conflicts with the scientific reassertion of the object here. There is, in fact, no

¹⁸ Laruelle, *The Concept of Non-Photography*, *ibid*, p133

¹⁹ Andrew McGettigan, ‘Fabrication Defect: François Laruelle’s philosophical materials’, *Radical Philosophy*, No 175, Sept/Oct 2012, p41

subject at stake in Laruelle's non-philosophy.²⁰ Indeed, both Laruelle and speculative realism represent forms of rationalism that depose idealism in the name of a *new thinking of the object* (a thinking of the object irreducible to the subject). In this light, mathematicized science and theoretical speculation, in their immanent analysis of the object 'in-itself' become the privileged means by which the thinker exposes the false or weak abstractions (ideological thinking) and their forms of intellectual support in the consensual intersubjectivity of the philosophical cogito. In crucial sense, then, the enemy is not exactly appearances, but the interpretation of, or metaphysical projection into, appearances, in an echo of the classic post-Kantian and post-Hegelian post-subject 'scientism' of Rudolf Carnap.²¹ If Laruelle calls this the outcome of the philosophical cogito decisionism, Quentin Meillassoux calls it correlationism and the "becoming-religious of thought," or the "religionizing of reason."²² Indeed, this link between the idea of correlationism/decisionism and religious thought is fundamental to this return *to* the object. Thought *of* the object in-itself offers a resistance to the object as a metaphysical or even dogmatic metaphysical prop for spiritual values, 'language games', or various forms of historical probabilism. For Meillassoux, this requires a fundamental temporalization of the object. As he argues in *Against Finitude* (2008): philosophy's task against this current becoming-truth of belief (fideism, or faith independent of reason) is in the re-ontologization of the scope of mathematics as an absolutization of contingency (that is, the only convincing and non-circular way of exposing dogmatic metaphysics – of avoiding a clash of incommensurable secular and non-secular faiths - is absolutizing the contingency of the given in general [and as such all laws in nature and society]): "critical potency is not necessarily on the side of those who would undermine the validity of absolute truths, but rather on the side of those who would succeed in criticizing *both* ideological dogmatism and sceptical fanaticism. Against dogmatism, it is important that we uphold the refusal of every metaphysical absolute, but against the reasoned violence of various fantaticisms, it is

²⁰ François Laruelle, *Intellectuals and Power: The Insurrection of the Victim*, François Laruelle in conversation with Philippe Petit, translated by Anthony Paul Smith, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2015

²¹ Rudolf Carnap, *The Unity of Science*, trans. with an introduction by Max Black, Thoemmes Press, Bristol, 1997

²² Quentin Meillassoux, *After Infinity: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, preface by Alain Badiou, translated by Ray Brassier, 2008, Continuum, London and New York, 2008, p46, p47

important that we re-discover in thought a modicum of absoluteness...”²³ (the absoluteness of contingency). Things may have primary qualities and essences, but these primary qualities and essences can be at some future point *other than they are*. Thus, insofar as mathematical science tells us that necessity cannot be derived from appearances (of inductively arriving at lawfulness through appearances), the absolutization of contingency thereby, allows us to think the non-necessity of necessity. For Laruelle, similarly, the “authentically scientific”²⁴ critique of metaphysics is the problem of philosophical syntax: the ontologization of difference (contingency, heterogeneity) in post-Kantian philosophy, far from freeing philosophy from metaphysics produces a new metaphysical move: the ‘coupling’ and mutual constitution of *differences*. That is, philosophies of difference are merely localized *redistributions* of essences. The decisionist ‘vanity’ of post-Kantian philosophy, therefore, lies in its inability or unwillingness, to “acquire a scientific, non-aporetic knowledge” of itself,²⁵ in which critique in philosophy “would no longer be a complement, a rectification, a deconstruction, a supplement.”²⁶ Central to the failure to achieve this end is the abandonment the real as *non-reflexive reality*, or what Laruelle calls the One (an undecidable externality), for “infinite metaphysical games of language.”²⁷ The One, in other words, is a kind of cognate of a transcendental extra-discursive real (although this is not to be confused with matter as such, in a kind of positivistic sense). “The in-itself and non-reflexive One is distinguished from the regions of the empirical and ideality by a pure transcendental distinction that is immediately a ‘real’ distinction...the real no longer designating the ontic but rather [a] sphere of non-reflexive immanence. Transcendental distinction is here grounded ‘in the nature of the thing’...”²⁸ In this respect, Meillassoux and Laruelle share a certain objectivist, de-subjectivising spirit: the adaptation of science as a would-be enlargement of philosophical judgement outside of the vicissitudes of a, critical-critical, and aporetic thought of the object - a leap beyond finitude we might say. But the cost of this post-Kantian rejection of the limits of being-thought and the critique of induction is the content of abstraction itself. Abstraction, in Laruelle and

²³ Ibid, p49

²⁴ François Laruelle, *Philosophies of Difference*, pxviii

²⁵ Ibid, p11

²⁶ Ibid, pxxii

²⁷ Ibid, p193

²⁸ Ibid, p185

speculative realism is made incompatible with praxis and with contradiction, a move in the end that only returns philosophy – and philosophy in cultural theory - to a version of pre-Hegelian materialism. This turns crucially on their understanding of the critique of Sufficient Reason.

Because there is no such thing as Sufficient Reason for Laruelle and Meillassoux - because they reject that things have good reason to be as they are than otherwise - it makes it impossible to infer that one state of affairs or event is more probable or feasible than another. This obviously creates a chronic ontological instability or insecurity, certainly in Meillassoux; as Frank Ruda argues: “the only sufficient reason for things to be how they are is that there is no sufficient reason for them to be how they are at all.”²⁹ Now of course, this is precisely what drives this rationalist materialism’s non-circular claims to post-metaphysical liberation beyond Kant’s would-be correlationism: yes, the absolutization of contingency is frightening and destabilizing, but this is an infinitely productive move, because it allows massive scope, as Laruelle insists – and as we have noted - for “unlimited theoretical” possibilities as a result of the unlocking of thought from the givenness of objects. That things can be other than they are means that philosophy loses its fear of the object, insofar as thinking is no longer forced to subject itself to the causal trajectories, pregiven histories and ontic intricacies and stabilities of its objects (as in Laruelle’s dogmatic rejection of photography’s representational, social-relational intimacy with World, City and History). Undoubtedly, the critique of Sufficient Reason is fundamental to the critique of any naïve realism or historicism; objects in themselves are not foundational for the natural sciences or social sciences and the present is not the pregiven outcome of the past. This is something that all post-Spinozan materialist philosophies (including Hegel) share with speculative realism. But the absolutizing of contingency here as a de-subjectivizing of the philosophical cogito commits an unforgiving solecism in its loss of fear of the object: if *everything* is contingent, theories, social objects, natural kinds, then something might not be contingent; if everything is possible, then something might not be possible, that is, the possibility of ‘everything is possible’ might include the possibility that ‘everything is not possible’. There is always a possibility of non-possibility, always a possibility of non-

²⁹ Frank Ruda, The Speculative Family, or: Critique of the Critical Critique of Critique, *Filozofski vestnik*, Vol XXXI11, No 2 2012, p61

contingency. Thus in presupposing, therefore, that the non-necessity of necessity is the answer to dogmatic metaphysics, rationalist materialism of this stripe, is guilty as Ruda says: of a “non-dialectical generalization of un-totalizability.”³⁰ In other words, once contingency becomes the name for necessity and therefore precedes existence, the absolutization of contingency becomes a metaphysical and abstract notion itself, destructive of the continuity necessary for thought and practice and scientific enquiry³¹ (although Meillassoux, in a strange qualification of his position says, the absolutization of contingency only entails laws that could change *invisibly* from one moment to the next).³² As Ruda explains: “Contingency can only be logically anterior to any existence *if* there already is existence. Contingency is the retroactive anteriority to any existence *because* there is existence (thus it is not contingency that generates existence, but existence that generates insight into the very anteriority of contingency and hence already determines contingency”).³³ As such, as Hegel, insists, in his confrontation with Spinoza’s own rationalist, secular critique of necessity and Sufficient Reason, the *necessity of contingency is itself contingent*.³⁴ Not all is contingent. Or rather, the only necessity is not necessarily that of contingency.

The political, and philosophical and scientific consequences, which emerge from the absolute necessity of contingency, then, are deeply unappealing: as in Gnosticism, ‘everything is possible’ is uncoupled from the mediations between contingency, conceptualization and the real. That is, if science speaks about the mind-independent world, this does not mean that matter guarantees materialism or the real for science, as if the truth *of* things is secured by the physicalist appropriation of a mind-independent nature. The real, rather, is produced at a conceptual level, out of this encounter with matter and the object, in so far as science works to produce the real

³⁰ Frank Ruda, ‘The Speculative Family, or: Critique of the Critical Critique of Critique’, p68

³¹ See Alasdair Macintyre, *Three Versions of Moral Enquiry*, Duckworth, London, 1990, pp196-215

³² See ‘Interview with Quentin Meillassoux (August 2010)’ by Graham Harman, in *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2011, pp159-174

³³ Ruda, *ibid*, p68

³⁴ G.W.F Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1977

through this process. The conceptualizations of science, therefore, do not simply mediate the real of a mind-independent world they actively *produce* the real not *as* idea, but as a space for further enquiry into, and transformation of, the real. This is why the discursive-real/real antipode of speculative realism, is deeply compromised as a philosophical model of how science actually works in the world, given speculative realism's reliance on a commonplace or naïve realist view of scientific practice perpetrated by many scientists: concepts explain the world, which are then confirmed by empirical facts. Contrary, however, to the positing of the truth of externality to the untruth of internality, science opens up a space in which scientific discourse has actual "real consequences," as Alenka Zupancic puts it. As she, argues: "The fact that the discourse of science creates, opens up a space in which [scientific] discourse has (real) consequences also means that it can produce something that not only becomes a part of reality, but that can also change it." ³⁵ "Modern science literally creates a new real(ity); it is not that the object of science is mediated by its formulas, it is indistinguishable from them; it does not exist outside of them, yet it is real." ³⁶ Science *returns* to the real; and therefore effectively the conventionalist argument about the real being an effect of discourse - which drives the critique of correlationalism in speculative realism - is functionally misconceived. In other words, the conceptual productions of science do not *subjectivize* the world – and as such produce it *as* discourse and philosophical speculation - they are the *answering call* to the real that the conceptualization of the real *necessarily* demands. Consequently if science as a matter of self-definition requires a critique of Sufficient Reason, (in order to wrest science away from finding teleological or spiritual meaning in matter), it doesn't need the *absolutization of contingency* in order to achieve this. For, the outcome, paradoxically of the absolutization of contingency as a scientific move within philosophy, is the anti-scientific demotion of the real as a non-contingent demand on the conceptualization of real. Once contingency is absolutized as a critique of dogmatic metaphysics, all causation becomes suspect as way of explaining necessity. Because causation is unable to conform to any law-giving arrangements *in the long run*, the time of causation is rendered unreal. Hence the major outcome of the absolute release of contingency, of the liberation of the object from necessity, is that it

³⁵ Alenka Zupancic, 'Realism in Psychoanalysis', in Lorenza Chiesa, ed., *Lacan and Philosophy: The New Generation*, re.press, Melbourne, 2014, p27

³⁶ Ibid, p25

leaves everything as it is, because if there is no reason why things *are* the way they (within either a given mortal or cosmological time frame), then objects and their relations lose all traction as things that may change or *necessarily* resist change, or conversely may necessarily require change because they resist change. Thus on this account, inferring change, on the basis of a probabilistic account of a given set of tendencies, is ruled out of court from the beginning. This is because, such probabilistic tendencies are *themselves* held to be contingent or arbitrary under all conditions. One can see, then, why, the rational materialism of speculative realism has a certain scientific and secular appeal at the moment, under the pressure of what we might call the Zizekian-type pincer movement of contemporary liberal fideism and fundamentalist dogmatism.

The neo-liberal rationalization and tolerance of stupidity and ignorance as ‘personal belief’, and the justification of ‘revealed truth’ as ‘spiritual flourishing’ in various religious fundamentalisms, spreads the dogmatic subjectivization of thought into every nook and cranny of capitalist life, producing, as a counter to this, a tempting scientific reaction or point of objectivist intolerance, *inside* contemporary philosophy, in its critique of both subjectivism and positivism. *Against Finitude* and Laruelle’s speculative scientism, thus, have a certain family resemblance to the post-ideological invective of Richard Dawkins³⁷: *a plague on all your ideological plagues*. True emancipation, on their watch, lies in protecting science from the discursive cage of theory and embracing truth in philosophy as a knowledge of the ‘great Outside,’ as a big, bold clear out of the contemporary “religionizing” of thought – or, in different register, doing to death the death of the death of God. But back on earth, in the day-to-day workings of ideology and practice, objects are not simply contingent essences that need liberating from the subjectivist grip of correlationism or decisionism (in order to resist the lures of fideism), but contradictory sites of subject-object mediation. This means that the ‘object-liberation movement’ of the new rationalist materialism fails (or more precisely rejects) a principle test of the dialectical tradition: the *unity* of appearance and reality. In this tradition there are no mere appearances or mere illusions; appearances and illusions are a product of the movement of the real itself. And therefore all appearances and illusions contain some measure of truth; that

³⁷ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Bantam Press, London, 2006

is appearances and illusions reveal as much as they conceal the reality that is manifest in them.³⁸ If conceptualization answers the real, then, it answers it on these terms: thought and praxis as immanent to illusion. This requires a subject who-is-not-a-subject,³⁹ who is transcendently constituted not through the neutral access to the object-in-itself, but through the vicissitudes of struggle and failure. This means in turn a fundamental *re-correlation* of subject and object. As Slavoj Žižek argues: “we cannot gain full neutral access to reality because *we are part of it*. The epistemological distortion of our access to reality is the result of our *inclusion* in it, not of our distance from it...the very epistemological failure (to reach reality) is an indication and effect of our being part of reality, of our inclusion within it.”⁴⁰ The absolutization of contingency breaks this dialectical link, in its non-dialectical totalization of things, by treating *all* appearances as subjective illusions. As a result, what Marx calls the “relative necessity” of appearances (the explanatory link between appearances and objective/subjective ‘real possibilities’ in the world) is made incomprehensible.⁴¹ This is why conceptualization as the theorization of appearances, is an answer to the immanent transformation of the real, and not simply, the means by which appearances ‘lack of reason’ are exposed.

Laruelle’s concept of non-photography (and non-philosophy) is particularly guilty here of this anti-dialectical flattening of appearance and the real - if one can actually assign culpability to a system that doesn’t see the real as a philosophical problem at all in these terms, and therefore, has no sense of the relationship between appearances and knowledge, indeed, refuses it out of hand: the object of philosophy is not the conceptualization of the real as a delimited manifestation *of* the real, of an

³⁸ Sean Sayers, *Reality and Reason: Dialectic and the Theory of Knowledge*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1985

³⁹ John Roberts, *The Necessity of Errors*, Verso, London and New York, 2011

⁴⁰ Slavoj Žižek, ‘Interlude 5: Correlationalism and Its Discontents’, in *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, Verso, London and New York, p646

⁴¹ This is principally an attack on Epicurus’s speculative critique of necessity: Karl Marx, ‘Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature’, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Vol 1, *Collected Works*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1975, p44. “It is a misfortune to live in necessity, but to live in necessity is not a necessity.” (Epicurus, quoted by Marx, p43)

intervention into the real, but the “specularization of real objects”.⁴² In other words, given that for Laruelle the photographic image is an *image-thing*, rather an *image of the thing*, appearances have no constitutive relationship to truths that possibly stand ‘behind them’ inferentially. Photographs harbour “nothing invisible.”⁴³ In other words appearances have no immanent relationship to the real. This is why his abstract photo-theory, wants nothing to do with photography’s would-be relational, conceptual claims on its real objects (the World, History, the City): “Far from giving back perception, history or actuality, etc, in a weakened form”,⁴⁴ photography reveals an “immanent chaos”⁴⁵ that is derived directly from the gap between the image-thing and the image of the thing. Because, as Laruelle declares, a photograph is a semblance that resembles nothing – a flat identity in the last instance - there is no requirement on the part of an abstract theory of photography for thought in fact to be ‘accountable’ to appearances, indeed, for theory to be accountable to appearances is to undermine the very possibility of speculative thought itself. “A photo is more than a window or an opening, it is an infinite open, an unlimited universe from vision to the pure state.”⁴⁶ Photographs are, on the contrary, *algorithms* – transitional states - not schemas, he says, and as such, opposed to every philosophical synthesis that would hierarchize their contents based on a notion of inferential truth. Consequently, photographic appearances do not *disclose* abstractions (social division, spatial relations, the unconscious), they are *themselves* abstractions, that is, manifestations of photography as a field of infinite materialities. And Laruelle calls this algorithmic potential photography’s essential fractality (that is, its immanent resistance to philosophical synthesis as a condition of the gap between image-thing and image-as-thing, and not evidence of the photograph’s hidden geometric relations, in the manner of chaos theory). Fractality, then, is the intensive excess derived from photography’s irreducibility to representation that photography instantiates and calls for from an abstract theory of photography. As such, in his later refinement of this theory in *Photo-Fiction, a Non-Standard Aesthetics* (2012), fractality becomes more precisely,

⁴² Ray Brassier, “Axiomatic Heresy: The Non-Philosophy of François Laruelle”, *Radical Philosophy*, No 121, September/October 2003, p32

⁴³ François Laruelle, *The Concept of Non-Photography*, *ibid*, p105

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p53

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p95

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p108

the “onto-vectorial” and “quantic” aspect of the photograph⁴⁷ “liberating possibilities of new virtualities.”⁴⁸ He calls, this process more broadly, photo-fiction or thought-art, in which the “photo is now the end of realism via an excess of the real and the absence of reality.”⁴⁹ Indeed, the photographer ‘loses’ his causal and historico-conceptual relation to the world, in exchange for an art of “interweaving disciplines.”⁵⁰ The quantic and the onto-vectorial, consequently, are forged by, and folded into, the “impossibilities of representation.”⁵¹ This in turn provides the jumping off point for a philosophy (non-philosophy) that builds off the absolute fiction of the photograph, without description or metaphor. Such descriptive and metaphoric moves are simply *photo-centric* (that is decisionist). As such, the meaning of the photograph cannot be produced historically or dialectically, only quantically, through the immanent operations of photo-fiction itself. In such photo-fictions and their interpretations the conceptual image remains an “objective appearance”⁵² and, therefore, denies the world-determining and realist relation of standard photography and critical-theoretic or genealogical-historical criticism. In these terms, abstraction as a non-consistent multiplicity here, is a version of the absolutization of contingency at the level of perception, and returns us to all the problems of the post-dialectical tradition, that besets this rationalist materialism and speculative realism.

Photographs clearly are not simply windows on the world or fictive symbols, they are indeed abstractions as Laruelle correctly insists, but they are abstractions not simply because they constitute in their theoretical reception a “transcendental creative force”⁵³ or refuse the “complacencies of recognition”,⁵⁴ and “perceptual normality”⁵⁵, but because they are the outcome of, and instate, a specific set of social determinations. In this sense, photographs are properly concrete abstractions (socially embedded signs) that are also real abstractions (that is subject to and are the product

⁴⁷ François Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction, a Non-Standard Aesthetics*, translated by Drew S. Burk, Univocal Publishing, Minneapolis, 2012, p58

⁴⁸ Ibid, p9

⁴⁹ Ibid, p21

⁵⁰ Ibid, p26

⁵¹ Ibid, p30

⁵² Ibid, p80

⁵³ Ibid, p141

⁵⁴ Ibid, p109

⁵⁵ Ibid, p79

of conflicting processes of social and technological reproduction and commodity exchange that operate transindividually behind the backs of producers and spectators alike).⁵⁶ And this is why the appearances of photography, therefore, are not ‘pure phenomena’ waiting for unlimited quantic speculation, but the objective concretization of these processes of abstraction and as such recoverable in theory. Photography, then, is both a process *of* (real) abstraction and a system of appearance-generating mechanisms by which social abstractions are produced as signs as the outcome of this objective process. Consequently, the appearances of photography are caught up in the conflicts and contradictions of these processes as the source of photography’s (abstract) truth-claims.

Thus, at one level, Laruelle, in the spirit of the critique of Sufficient Reason, is right (indeed he calls his theoretical move a critique of the Principle of Sufficient Photography). We need a theory of abstraction *in* photography and not as a formal afterthought or critical addendum; photographs are always more than their given or assumed appearances. This is in order to tell us that photographs are not mere things, not mere appearances, not mere illusory symbols, but (conflictual) ideological entities, that, in their very fallen and fractured ideological condition, open out onto the world. Consequently, we also need a theory of abstraction that resists the received categories and generic assumptions of naïve realism; a theory of abstraction, that is, as Laruelle puts it, resistant to false or pre-given syntheses and historicist closures. Laruelle, is right to insist, therefore, as abstractions photographs demand an active theoretical engagement. What we *don’t* require, however, is a theory of abstraction in which a version of the absolutization of contingency dismantles the link between appearances and truth telling as the necessary precondition of abstraction as speculation (“photography is a representation that neither reasons nor reflects”).⁵⁷ This is a wholly *underdetermined* account of photography, in which the inferential powers of abstraction – of photographic appearance as conceptually contentful in a determinate fashion - are weakened, diminishing the place of the photograph in a

⁵⁶ For a discussion of the transindividual function of real abstraction, see Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, Macmillan, London, 1978

⁵⁷ Laruelle, *ibid*, p37

socially discursive account of representation as a “giving and asking for reasons.”⁵⁸ In reifying singularity – in Laruelle’s language, fractality – therefore, the truth-producing aporias and conflicts of photography disappear into *mere* abstraction, into the indeterminate and non-dialectical abstractedness of photography as a *non-consistent* multiplicity; a theory of abstraction *without* abstraction, so to speak, without relation and the real. In the final analysis, then, this turns on the deep-lying character of the science-world relation as part of a dialectical account of representation and the image. The emergence of the modern and the transformation of nature begin when the concepts of science *possess* the world and the real in all their multiplicity in order to transform nature and the world and the concepts of science; this is truly emancipatory. Possession then as form of abstraction is closer to *Darstellungsmethode*, in Marx’s sense,⁵⁹ than it is to *Vertretung*, that is closer to representation as *active* depiction, as staged production, than representation as ‘acting for’, as representative *of*; as replication, copying. Abstraction is not simply a matter of epistemology (of reflection) – of the conceptualization of sensuous particulars – but, rather, an act of world building. That is, the work of abstraction already begins from the process of abstraction, from the concrete-as-abstraction.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, it is *Vertretung* that is invariably identified with abstraction as a process of conceptualization, and therefore with the notion that abstraction is presupposed by an instrumentalizing and self-distancing relation to the world. Conceptualization as a reflexive and active production and possession of the real (as an answering response to the demands of the real as not-all), so crucial to the practice of abstraction in *Darstellungsmethode* is forgotten. Yet, it is precisely abstraction in these terms that is able to think the relationship between appearances and the demands of the real, discursiveness and the extra-discursive, as a condition of transformative practice. For it is precisely abstraction as *Darstellungsmethode*, as the dialectical possession of appearances, and therefore, of the production of the real as the conceptualization of

⁵⁸ For a defence of the inferential role of representation, see Robert B. Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2009, p184

⁵⁹ See Hans Friedrich Fulda, ‘Dialektik als Darstellungsmethode von Marx’, in, *Ajatus*. Suomen Filosofisen Yhdistyksen vuosikirja, 37, 1978, pp180–216.

⁶⁰ For a discussion of abstraction and concrete abstraction, see Alberto Toscano, ‘The Open Secret of Real Abstraction,’ *Rethinking Marxism*, Vol 20 Issue 2, 2008 , pp273-287

the ‘not all’, that creates a “new space of the real.”⁶¹ The real is not an essence or substance to be ‘found’ discursively or extra-discursively, it is a limit-condition to be defined. Laruelle and speculative realism, however, in their respective versions of ‘world building’ as abstraction offer a version of *Darstellungsmethode* without this necessary torsion. Indeed, they want abstraction without the real of the ‘not-all’, without determinate ‘limits’, and therefore without a subject who is part of this consequentialist struggle inside, and for, the real.

⁶¹ Alenka Zupancic, ‘Realism in Psychoanalysis’, p28 and p26